

## Introduction to the Soviet Union



*Royalty and nobles attending a court ball in Russia*

The Russian empire included lands of many diverse people in the northern part of the Eurasian continent. For hundreds of years, kings, or *tsars*, ruled Russia. A small number of people—royalty, nobles, and religious leaders—controlled most of the country's land and wealth. The tsar personally owned millions of acres of land, over one million servants, and dozens of

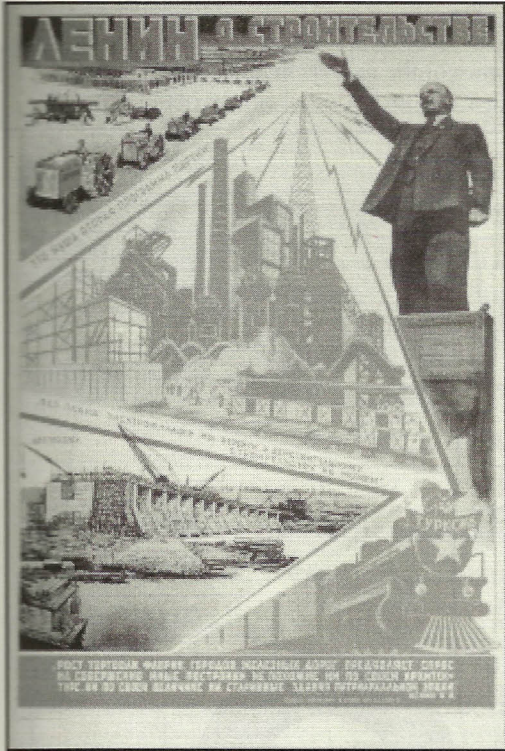
palaces throughout the empire. While the nobility lived lives of wealth and pleasure, or *luxury*, most of the peasants were very poor. In the 1800s, about 90 percent of the Russian population were peasant farmers who worked on the land owned by the nobility. They had no legal rights, could not own land, and were not free to move.

In the early 1900s, some Russian people who were discontent with the tsar organized the Communist Party. The communists wanted to create a society where all people were equal, and no one was poor, unemployed (without work), or homeless. They thought no one should have greater wealth or power than anyone else. Lenin was a leader of the Communist Party. In 1917, he led the Russian Revolution, in which the people in Russia rose up and demanded that the last tsar step down. The Communist Party declared a new country, and called it the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or USSR. The USSR, also called the Soviet Union, included most areas of the former Russian empire. The Communist government took control of most of the country's land, factories, and companies, or *industries*. Lenin wanted the Soviet Union to become a society based on equality. He passed laws to make sure that men and women were treated equally, and gave all citizens the right to vote. The Communist Party built hundreds of schools to teach workers and peasants how to read. They also built hospitals and clinics across the country.



*Lenin declaring the power of the Soviet Union*





Poster showing various Soviet industries

After Lenin died in 1924, Josef Stalin took power. Stalin feared that European countries—who did not like communism—might send their armies to invade the Soviet Union. To be strong, he believed, the Soviet Union must quickly build up a strong army, or military. The Soviet Union had rich farmlands and vast resources of coal, iron, and other minerals. Stalin decided to use these resources to build industries that could make a strong military. Stalin thought that the best way to do this was to create a *state-planned economy*. This means the government took total control of the farms, factories, and companies. The government then made all decisions about what would be produced, how much would be produced, who would produce it, and how much workers would get paid. Stalin created a series of plans, each of which lasted for 5 years. The 5-year plans stated how much industries had to produce.

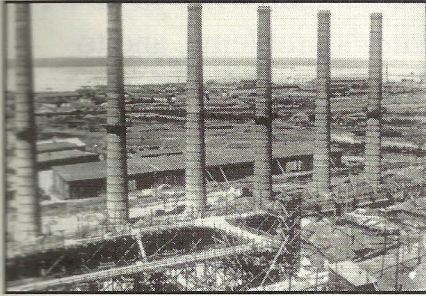
They also called for huge factories to be built. These factories would provide iron, chemical products, and fuel needed to build tractors, tanks, airplanes, and ships for the military.

Stalin's leadership caused great hardship at best, and terror at worst, for the Soviet population. Expanding cities and factories needed more food to feed workers. Stalin forced peasants to give up their small plots of land and work together, or *collectively*, on large state-owned farms. The government used the 5-year plans to tell the farms how much they had to produce, and regularly collected grain from the farms. The collective farms completely changed peasants' way of life. Peasants who refused to leave their land were sent to prison camps, killed, or denied food. At first, the collective farms were not successful at all. As a result, 3 to 4 million Soviet citizens died of hunger, or *starvation*.

Stalin also wanted to take complete control of Soviet society. He sought to clean, or *purge*, the country of anyone he thought might not support his rule. Stalin and the Communist Party accused many innocent people of committing (doing) crimes against the government. Stalin's secret police, called the NKVD, arrested, imprisoned, and killed 2 to 3 million Soviet citizens. Despite the violence, the Soviet Union continued to become more industrial. And, the country's military power continued to grow, with the government spending more and more money on weapons.



## Soviet Reforms



*Factory in the Soviet Union*

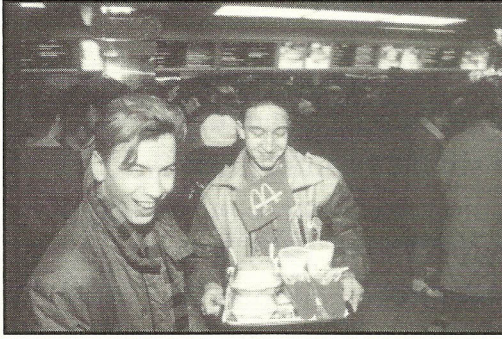
Under the control of Stalin's government, the Soviet Union changed from a simple farming society to an industrial society, in which goods were *manufactured* (made in factories). Stalin died in 1953, but for 30 years afterward the government continued to control the farms and factories that produced the country's goods. During this time, the Soviet government spent most of its money on the military. It even borrowed additional money from other countries to build up the military, so the Soviet Union could remain one of the strongest countries in the world. However, there were many serious problems in Soviet society. The government did not spend money on things Soviet citizens needed. People often did not have enough food to eat or apartments to live in. And most of the things they bought were poorly made. By the 1980s, government leaders began to worry that they could not pay back the money they had borrowed. And they were concerned that the government was spending too much money on weapons. To solve these problems, some Soviet leaders started thinking about changing the way their country was governed.

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev created three big reforms (changes to make things better). The reforms were called *perestroika*, *glasnost*, and *demokratizatsia*. *Perestroika*, which means "restructuring," meant moving away from the state-planned economy created by Stalin. Under *perestroika*, the government allowed companies to make more business decisions, like: *What kind of materials do we need? Where should we buy them? What kinds of goods should we sell?* Before *perestroika*, if companies lost money, the government would help them so they did not go out of business. Now, the companies had to support themselves and could no longer depend on the government. Gorbachev also began to spend less money on weapons, and encouraged people to set up their own private businesses. He invited other countries to start new businesses with Soviet companies. The goal of *perestroika* was to help companies produce more and better goods, and to improve citizens' living conditions. With these changes, Gorbachev hoped that Soviet society would improve with the communist government still in place. However, *perestroika* ended up being the first step toward a new form of government.



*Gorbachev visiting U.S. president Ronald Reagan*





McDonalds in Moscow

Gorbachev's second reform was *glasnost* (Russian for "openness"). Gorbachev knew that if he was going to succeed, people had to be free to talk about their country's problems, and to make suggestions for solving those problems. With *glasnost*, the media (newspapers, radio, and TV) were allowed to say what they thought the government was doing wrong. People were allowed to read books that the government had not

allowed them to read before. And, people who had been put in prison for speaking out against the government were set free. For the first time, Soviet citizens learned how people in the West (Europe and the United States) lived. They began to enjoy western music and fashions and ideas. All this made the Soviets start to ask questions about the way the Soviet Union had been governed. *Should the government decide how everything was done? Was communism good or bad? Was it right that the Communist Party should have all the power? The Soviet Union was made up of many different regions. Was the Soviet Union really one country at all?*

Gorbachev's third reform was *demokratizatsia*. Glasnost let people say what they thought. *Demokratizatsia* gave them the power to change things by letting them choose their leaders. In the past, even though Soviet citizens voted to elect their leaders, there was only one candidate (person that they could choose). But in 1989, for the first time in Soviet history, voters could choose from several candidates. Some of the candidates were not even communists. *Demokratizatsia*, like Gorbachev's other two reforms, weakened Gorbachev's own power in the end. In 1991, Boris Yeltsin was elected from a list of four candidates to become the first president of Russia. Russia and the other countries of the Soviet Union were growing more and more independent. This meant that Gorbachev, as the president of the Soviet Union, no longer had very much real power. He gave up his job as president in 1991, not long after Boris Yeltsin was elected.

Gorbachev created his three reforms—*perestroika*, *glasnost*, and *demokratizatsia*—because he wanted to solve the Soviet Union's problems. However, this was almost impossible to do. Eventually, the Soviet Union fell apart, and many of the regions in the country broke away to become independent countries.